

# Are Companion Animals the Secret to Good Health?



BRADLEY SMITH and PETRA BYWOOD

Primary Health Care Research and Information Service (PHC RIS)

Contact details: [Petra.Bywood@flinders.edu.au](mailto:Petra.Bywood@flinders.edu.au) Tel (08) 7221 8516



## Introduction

- People usually keep pets for companionship, recreation and protection rather than specifically for enhancing their health.<sup>1</sup>
- Studies indicate that companion animal ownership is beneficial to physical, psychological and social health.<sup>2</sup>



## Aims

- To summarise the health-related aspects of companion animal ownership
- To identify ways in which general practitioners can encourage patients to improve their health and wellbeing by interacting with their pets.

## Methods

- A review of the literature was conducted to explore the relationship between pets/companion animals and health.

## Findings

- Pets may provide a range of health benefits to their owners (see Figure 1)
- Improved health and wellbeing related to pet ownership reduces the use of healthcare services<sup>3</sup>
- GPs may integrate patient-pet interaction into self-management plans – e.g., walking the dog

- In clinical settings, companion animals decrease stress experienced by autistic children; and increase rapport between practitioner and child
- Determining the level of pet attachment and interaction facilitates discussion about health and lifestyle
- Understanding a patient's attachment to their pet(s) may also explain why they may be reluctant to seek help if they fear separation from their beloved pet.



### Physical Health

Cardiovascular: reduce stress, lower BP  
Physical fitness: lose weight, improve general health



### Psychological Health

Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT): increase morale in Alzheimer's patients; increase social skills in ADHD children  
Mental health: reduce loneliness, depression; reduce stress of major adverse events in the elderly  
Child development: improve social-emotional development of children; increase trust, self-confidence, safety



### Social Health

Catalyst for meeting people; increase social opportunities  
Positive correlation with family cohesion  
Improve social interaction for the elderly and Alzheimer's patients

Figure 1. Health-related benefits of companion animal ownership

## Conclusions

- While it is not appropriate to recommend or 'prescribe' the purchase of a pet, encouraging patients to increase the quality of interactions with their pet may improve their physical, psychological and social health and wellbeing.

For further details, see: Smith, B. (2012) The 'pet effect'. Health related aspects of companion animal ownership. *Australian Family Physician*, Vol. 41(6): 439-42.

## References

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2. Wells, D. L. (2009). The effects of animals on human health and well-being. *Journal of Social Issues*, 65(3), 523-543
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